

The Man without Attributes: Ibn Arabi's Interpretation of Abu Yazid

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One of the characteristic epithets of the great Sufi master Ibn 'Arabi is Muhyi al-Din, the "Revivifier of the Faith". When we ask what this means in practice, it raises the question of how a mystic interacts with the tradition. A Sufi of the stature of Ibn Arabi does not simply recapitulate the experiences and commentaries of early generations of Sufis. The more comprehensive the vision of a thinker, the more important

it is to examine how this vision integrates, or in this case revivifies, the insights of previous thinkers into a synthetic edifice. It has long been recognized that Ibn 'Arabi paid close attention to his spiritual forebears, certainly the prophets but also of course the many Sufis who first elaborated the parameters of the Islamic mystical tradition. The interpretations that he has given to the sayings and experiences of earlier Sufis provide valuable indices of the ways in which the Shaykh constructed his relationship with the Sufi tradition. As an example of Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of his predecessors, I would like to examine his interpretation of Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 848—9), the enigmatic Persian whose bold ecstatic sayings have posed a continuing challenge to subsequent generations. Especially when we contrast Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of Abu Yazid with the Bistamian legacy as seen by other Sufis, we can come to understand the distinctiveness of Ibn 'Arabi's approach to the tradition.

Ibn 'Arabi has creatively appropriated the legacies of many other early Sufis, but the role of interpretation in the processes of oral and literary transmission has not yet been clarified.

Probably his best known reflection on an earlier Sufi is his commentary on the 157 questions of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi on the subject of the "seal of the saints".[2] Ibn 'Arabi also provided a critical commentary on a treatise by the Andalusian Ibn Qasyi (d. 1151).[3]

Another notable example is Dhu al-Nun the Egyptian (d. 860), to whom Ibn 'Arabi dedicated a special monographic study, collecting over five hundred of his sayings. This text has recently been translated into French by Roger Deladriere from unpublished manuscripts.[4] In his valuable introduction, Deladriere has indicated the remarkable complexity of this text. Ibn 'Arabi derived these sayings from both written and oral sources, with a good deal of overlapping. Some of Dhu al-Nun's sayings come exclusively from written texts: 69 from Ibn Bakuya and 114 from Kharkushi. Others, while found in standard Sufi texts, Ibn 'Arabi received also by oral tradition: 190 from Abu Nu'aym al-Isfahani, 153 from Ibn Khamis, 75 from Ibn al-Jawzi, 21 from al-Qushayri, and 21 from Ibn Jahdam.[5] Deladriere has also shown that parallel texts from Dhu al-Nun can be found in other Sufi sources and historical texts: 124 in Ibn 'Asakir's

history of Damascus, 171 in 'Attar's Persian hagiography, 114 in al-Munawi's Arabic hagiography, and a startling 402 in al-Suyuti's biography of Dhu al-Nun.[6] A major problem looms in clarifying the role of interpretation in the selection of these sayings. How many of these sayings are found in a majority of later transmitters, and how many exist only in a single source? Which saying does Ibn 'Arabi exclude? Does the picture of Dhu al-Nun that emerges in the works of other authors differ significantly from Ibn 'Arabi's? Another problem occurs in the textual variations of these sayings. Quotations from early Sufi sources can often undergo major transformations in words and authorship.[7] A great deal of close textual work needs to be done before we can know the exact significance of Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation of Dhu al-Nun.

In terms of textual transmission, comparison with other sources indicates that the literal version of some of Dhu al-Nun's sayings . given by Ibn 'Arabi differs significantly from versions known in other parts of the Islamic world. Persian and Indian Sufis quote a saying of Dhu al-Nun on intimacy with God as a justification for

listening to music (*sama'*). In the later sources, the authorship of the saying has shifted to one of its primary transmitters, so that it is now attributed to Ruzbihan Baqli. Ibn 'Arabi and other Arab Sufis, on the other hand, saw this saying (quoted in a significantly different form) as a description of the alternation between states of awe (*hayba*) and intimacy (*uns*).[8] The fact that Ibn 'Arabi quoted different versions of Dhu al-Nun's sayings than did other Sufi interpreters, or that he understood them differently, should not be a cause for suspicion, or for privileging one of these interpreters over another. It should rather be an opportunity to define Ibn 'Arabi's unique position in terms of his relation to the rest of the tradition.

Returning to Abu Yazid, it is apparent that Ibn 'Arabi held the Persian in great regard, as a mystic of remarkable attainments. Ibn 'Arabi probably makes more references to Abu Yazid than to any other early Sufi.[9] He refers to him as one of "the people of blame" (*al-malâmiyya*), one of the highest categories of spiritual rank.[10] Abu Yazid is one of the saints who have received every kind of divine manifestation in their breasts.[11] He is

one of the "people of unveiling and finding" (*ahl al-kashf wal-wujûd*) who attains God through poverty.[12] Ibn 'Arabi calls him "one of our companions" (*min ashâbinâ*) who "has realized the truth" (*kâna muhaqqiqan*).[13] To this category of "companions" belong others such as al-Ghazali, "the companions of hearts, witnessings, and unveilings - not the devotees, ascetics, or Sufis in general, but the people of realities and realization among them." [14] As one of the "realizers of the truth" (*al-muhaqqiqûn*), Abu Yazid holds the same view as Ibn 'Arabi on the relation between gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and knowledge (*cilm*). [15] Abu Yazid is one of the "substitutes" (*nâ'ib*, pi. *nuwwâb*) who holds the degree of "interior succession" (*al-khilâfa al-bâtina*), both terms referring to aspects of the office of the "pole" (*qutb*), the supreme figure of the spiritual hierarchy.[16] Abu Yazid's house, called "the house of the just" (*bayt al-abrâr*), is one of the places where spiritual influences remain at such a high intensity that the sensitive heart can still perceive them; in this sense, like the retreats of Junayd and Ibrahim ibn Adham, it is comparable at a lesser level to the

sacred precincts of Mecca.[17] Abu Yazid is also described as one of the "solitaries" (*afrâd*) who have attained to God, but who return to the world under divine compulsion.[18] In addition, Abu Yazid continues to be active as an Uwaysi spiritual guide for later generations of Sufis (such as Abu al-Hasan al-Kharaqani), and appears in visions to Ibn 'Arabi himself as well as to other figures such as Abu Madyan.[19] In short, Abu Yazid is clearly an authoritative representative of early Sufism, in the view of Ibn 'Arabi.

In singling out Abu Yazid as a Sufi authority, Ibn Arabi was following the lead of many earlier biographers and commentators. The first we know of was Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910), who interrogated one of Abu Yazid's relatives about his sayings, and then translated them from Persian into Arabic. Junayd's commentary (*tafsîr*) on these controversial sayings is partially preserved by Sarraj.[20] Further commentary is occasionally found in the collection of Sahlagi, mentioned below.[21] Other important interpretations occur in the Persian commentary on ecstatic sayings by

Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209) and in 'Attar's (d. ca. 1220) famous Persian hagiography.[22]

Ibn 'Arabi did not dedicate a single treatise to the sayings of Abu Yazid, as he did with Dhu al-Nun, so our task theoretically requires us to comb through the works of Ibn 'Arabi, especially *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, for significant references to Abu Yazid. In the scope of this article, it will only be possible to comment on a few examples, but these will suffice to frame the problem of how Ibn 'Arabi subtly interprets Abu Yazid in terms of his own overall perspective. Our main check will be the largest and oldest independent collection of the sayings of Abu Yazid, which was assembled in the eleventh century by al-Sahlagi (d. 1083) under the title *Kitâb al-nûr min kalimât Abî Tayfûr* ("The Book of Light on the Sayings of Abu Tayfur [Abu Yazid]")- The archaic and faulty Arabic text, with full isnâds, was edited by 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi from two MSS in 1949, and a considerably abridged French translation by Abdelwahab Meddeb has recently appeared.[23]

We may first consider cases where Ibn 'Arabi has reported the sayings of Abu Yazid with little or slight variation. An example is a saying on inspired exegesis. Ibn 'Arabi reports the following:

Abu Yazid said to the exoteric scholars, "You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Living who does not die!"[24]

If we compare the version given by al-Sahlagi, we find an account with the isnad plus a slightly different context:

Yusuf ibn al-Husayn said, "I heard Istanba [Ibrahim al-Harawi] say, 'I was attending the assembly of Abu Yazid, and the people said, "So-and-so has met so-and-so." Abu Yazid said, "Beggars! They have taken [their knowledge] from the dead, but I have taken our knowledge from the Living who does not die." [25]

The basic point is the same, although the nuances are different. Ibn 'Arabi's version does not refer to the people praising scholars for their direct transmission of learning from other scholars - Abu Yazid ridiculed this as a dead letter in comparison with the

living God who is always accessible to the saint. Rather than being a comment on exoteric learning occasioned by a chance remark, Ibn 'Arabi's version is a direct address to exoteric scholars as a class. There are other slight differences of tense and person that make al-Sahlagi's version more circumstantial and Ibn 'Arabi's more general. But none of this has major significance.

Another example is a saying which, shorn of context, becomes for Ibn 'Arabi an opportunity to explain a general point about the relationship between the servant and the divine Lord. Ibn 'Arabi's comment actually precedes and sets up the quotation from Abu Yazid:

At root the servant was created only to belong to God and to be a servant perpetually. He was not created to be a lord. So when God clothes him in the robe of mastership and commands him to appear in it, he appears as a servant in himself and a master in the view of the observer. This is the ornament of the Lord, the robe that He has placed upon him. Someone objected to Abu Yazid that the people touched him with their hands and sought blessing from him (*fî tamassuh al-nâs wa*

tabarrukihim). He replied, "They are not touching me, they are only touching an adornment with which my Lord has adorned me. Should I forbid them from that, when it does not belong to me?"[26]

The earlier version is somewhat different. It gives a dramatic account of a meeting between the youthful Abu Yazid and a condescending *hadîth* scholar, to whom Abu Yazid replies with a stunning revelation of his level of mystical experience:

A man from the Hadith Folk said to Abu Yazid, "Do you pray properly?" He said, "Yes, God willing." So he asked, "How do you pray?" He said, "I proclaim 'God is Most Great' in obedience, I recite with modulation, I kneel in veneration, I prostrate with humility, and I give salutation full of peace." Then he said, "Boy, if you have this understanding, excellence, and knowledge, why do you permit the people to touch you seeking blessing?" He replied, "They are not touching me, they are only touching an adornment with which my Lord has adorned me. Should I forbid them from that, when it does not belong to me?"[27]

While Ibn 'Arabi has quoted Abu Yazid's words without significant variation, his omission of the context has displaced a story about the contrast between mystical experience and scholarly learning and transformed it into an instance of a metaphysical relationship.

Next are cases in which Ibn 'Arabi has given a critical interpretation of Abu Yazid's saying, in which there is a major textual difference between Ibn 'Arabi's version and Sahlagi's. Here is an example:

Abu Yazid heard a Qu'ran reciter reciting the verse, "On the day when We shall muster the godfearing to the All-merciful in droves" [19:85]. He wept until his tears drummed upon the pulpit. It is also said that blood flowed from his eyes until it struck the pulpit. He cried out, saying, "How strange! Where will he who is sitting with Him be mustered?" When it came around to our time, I was asked about that. I replied: "There is nothing strange except the words of Abu Yazid." [28]

Ibn 'Arabi goes on to say that the "godfearing" are those souls who are related to the divine name "the

Overbearing" (*al-jabbar*), not to the name "the All-merciful". He finds it peculiar that Abu Yazid has not noticed that the Qur'an paradoxically connects the "godfearing" with what appears to be the wrong divine name. Ibn 'Arabi explains this apparent anomaly by pointing out that each divine name, by denoting the divine Essence, implies all the other divine names. Elsewhere, Ibn Arabi introduces the same anecdote with a long comment expanding on his doctrine of the divine names and Abu Yazid's failure to understand them.

Do you not see how Abu Yazid (God have mercy on him) acted, when he was ignorant of the divine names and which realities are appropriate to them, on hearing [this verse?]. In this state, he was sitting with the Names, insofar as none of them indicates the Essence; [but] he was not with the name, insofar as... he experienced denial, or rather he experienced wonder in a special way, which is similar to denial but is not denial, so that if this saying had been from other than God, he would have commanded the speaker to be silent and restrained him from that. The man only showed wonder at the word of God in respect to the godfearing who are

sitting with God; how will they be mustered to Him? [29]

Ibn 'Arabi notes that Abu Yazid was amazed at the paradox of how God will summon those (the godfearing) who are already in His presence, but he discounts this explanation as a lack of metaphysical comprehension.

If we turn to Sahlagi's collection, it turns out that what Ibn 'Arabi has reported is a conflation of separate accounts of Abu Yazid's reactions to two Qur'anic verses. First, Sahlagi gives two versions of Abu Yazid's response to the "mustered" verse (19:85):

1. "He got excited (*hâja*) and said, 'Whoever is with Him has no need to be mustered, because he is sitting with Him eternally.' " [30]
2. "He became ecstatic and enraptured (*tawâjada wa hâma*), and started saying, 'Whoever is with Him has no need to be mustered, because he is sitting with Him eternally.' " [31]

These two versions only differ in the language used to describe Abu Yazid's emotional state. The terms alluded to in

each case indicate delighted ecstasy (*wajd*, *hayajân*, *hayamân*) rather than doubtful wonderment. [32] Abu Yazid's remark belongs to the ecstatic critique of literal interpretations of the afterlife. In the context of early Sufism, this follows from the dissatisfaction with paradise as a final goal (Rabi'a, Shaiq al-Balkhi), and it forms a part of the outrageous ecstatic sayings that Abu Yazid and Shibli delivered about hell and judgment. [33]

Secondly, the detail mentioned by Ibn 'Arabi, that Abu Yazid wept tears of blood onto the pulpit on hearing the verse, occurs in Sahlagi's report of his reaction to an altogether different Qur'anic passage:

Abu Yazid one Friday sat above the pulpit, and the preacher sat on the pulpit and preached; when he reached this verse: "They did not truly measure the power of God" [6:91], Abu Yazid heard, and blood fell from his eyes until it struck the pulpit. [34]*

From the content of the verse, it appears that the emotional setting for Abu Yazid's powerful reaction was overwhelming awe. The complex

situations and different textual settings of Sahlagi's versions vary considerably from the portrayal of Ibn 'Arabi.

In one of his most intriguing sayings, Abu Yazid describes himself as the man without attributes. This saying has been commented on several times by Ibn 'Arabi and others, with textual variants that permit us to distinguish divergent interpretations of the saying. Ibn 'Arabi informs us that Abu Yazid used to say, "I have no morning and no evening; morning and evening belong to him who becomes delimited by attributes, but I have no attributes."^[35] He comments that God should be even less delimited by attributes: "The Real is more appropriately free from limitation (*taqyîd*) by attributes, due to His independence from the world, for attributes are only required by existing things. If there was in the Real that which the world requires, then it would not be correct that He be independent of that which seeks Him. ^[36] In another place, Ibn 'Arabi gives the text in a slightly different form, reading "Morning and evening only belong to one who becomes delimited by the attribute, but I have no attribute."^[37] This citation occurs in

the midst of Ibn 'Arabi's lexicon of Sufi terminology (which comprises the answer to al-Tirmidhi's 153rd question), under the definition of the term "place" (*makân*):

It is a station in "expansion" (*bast*) which only belongs to the perfect ones who have realized the stations and states, and who are permitted the station which is beyond majesty and beauty; they have no attribute or description. Abu Yazid was asked, "How are you this morning?" He said, "Morning and evening only belong to one who is limited by the attribute, but I have no attribute."

After narrating Abu Yazid's saying, Ibn 'Arabi comments, "Our companions differ over whether or not this saying is an ecstatic utterance (*shath*), but 'place' requires it of him."^[38] We shall return to the question of ecstatic utterances below, but for the moment it suffices to notice that Ibn 'Arabi's frequent references to this saying primarily indicate his interest in the problem of attributes and the concept of delimitation. This has theological ramifications for the divine attributes as well as mystical significance for those

who have, like Abu Yazid, gone beyond the attributes.^[39]

Other Sufis give a different version of this saying with an interpretation that follows another line entirely. Ruzbihan Baqli follows the version given by Sahlagi: "Morning and evening only belong to one who is held by the attribute, but as for me, I have no attribute."^[40] This version preserves a much more archaic flavor than Ibn 'Arabi's version, which uses a term from his own technical vocabulary; instead of saying that one is "held by" (*ta'khudhuhu*) the attribute, Ibn 'Arabi's version has it that one is "limited by" (*taqayyada bi-*) the attribute.^[41] In his original Arabic version of the commentary on ecstatic sayings, the *Mantiq al-asrâr* ("The Language of Consciences"), Ruzbihan Baqli comments that Abu Yazid's experience of witnessing God has taken him beyond time, to participate for a moment in eternity:

By this saying he alludes to his being drowned in the vision of eternity, and none of his attributes remains in the vision of the might of the Real. "God has no morning or evening." Morning and evening are from the coursing of

sun and moon in the heavens and in the conscience of Abu Yazid during the witnessing of the Real there was no existence of one who is less than "by the Real, with the Real, in the Real". He did not perceive time, place, the moment, or the seasons in this momentary state. I recall what the Master of the Gnostics [i.e., the Prophet] said, "I have a time with God."

In his own later Persian translation of the same commentary on ecstatic sayings (*Sharh-i shathiyyât*), Ruzbihan appears to have had new thoughts on the subject. He now begins by stressing passion, ecstasy, and annihilation as the main features of Abu Yazid's experience:

He alludes to ravishing (*walah*) and agitation (*hayajân*), and astonishment (*hayrat*) and bewilderment (*hayamân*), that is: "I am intoxicated and unconscious. From hearing the commands of creation without an ear, peace has been stripped from me, the bird of the elements and time has flown, my soul is lost in the hidden of the hidden, the form of existence has become changed for me, I remain in bewilderment without the

attribute of wayfaring. Having recited the existence of the verse "Everything upon it is vanishing" (*fanin*, Qur. 11:26, alluding to *fanâ'*), I am in the world without any trace, lifeless in love, and in the falsification of intellect and the confirmation of love, I cannot tell day from night.

Only after exhausting this theme does he return to the earlier interpretation of transcending time through witnessing God:

It is also possible that he alludes to the drowning of the soul in the vision of eternity, and in this cypher he explains that in eternity, the soul has no traces of temporal existence. "There is no morning or evening for God."^[43]

The saying "There is no morning or evening for God", also cited as *hadîth* by other Sufi writers,^[44] brings Ruzbihan to invoke another Prophetic saying, "The time I have with God", the eternity that is the mode of relationship between God and the prophet. He concludes, "Abu Yazid became qualified by the all in the essence of the all."

The variance between the views of Ruzbihan and Ibn 'Arabi does not provide any grounds for privileging one line of interpretation over any other - Ruzbihan has felt free to elaborate new interpretations and relegate his own earlier thoughts to a secondary position. Divergent texts and interpretations indicate rather that these Sufis used the sayings of earlier mystics as a way to explore the possibilities of meaning and experience rather than search for a single authoritative teaching. If we wished, we might try to reconstruct Abu Yazid's "doctrine" of divine attributes, on the basis of a number of passages in which he uses the term *sifa* or attribute.^[45] Such an archeological purpose did not play a part in the projects of either Ibn 'Arabi or Ruzbihan.

Another instance of Ibn Arabi's reflection on Abu Yazid contains a complex meditation on two different sayings about the all-encompassing nature of the heart.

The heart of the gnostic is infinite and contains all. Abu Yazid said, "If the Throne and all that surrounds it, multiplied a hundred million times, were to be in one of the many corners

of the Heart of the gnostic, he would not be aware of it." This was the scope of Abu Yazid in the realm of corporeal forms. I say, however, that, were limitless existence, if its limit could be imagined, together with the essence that brought it into existence, to be put into one of the corners of the Heart of the gnostic, he would have no consciousness of it. It is established that the Heart encompasses the Reality, but though it be filled, it thirsts on, as Abu Yazid said.[46]

Is this one-upmanship? It appears that Ibn 'Arabi criticizes Abu Yazid for merely using God's Throne as the measure of the heart, instead of all of existence and the divine essence too. Ibn 'Arabi's commentator Qashani feels required to explain,

There is no criticism here, rather he means that Abu Yazid, in his universal specification, gazed at the realm of corporeal forms through annihilation. But if he had gazed with the eye of God, he would have said something like [what Ibn 'Arabi said]; it was [seen by] the eye of the realm of corporeal forms, however, which is related to the beloveds by existent things.[47]

Thus the different comparisons used by the two mystics are merely a function of their different perspectives. The appearance of criticism is mitigated, too, by Ibn 'Arabi's reference to the infinite thirst of the gnostic's heart, which Abu Yazid has expressed in several sayings. It seems as though Ibn 'Arabi uses the experiences and sayings of Abu Yazid as points of departure for exploring his own experiences.[48]

In spite of his frequent reference to Abu Yazid and the high regard in which he held him, Ibn 'Arabi shows a certain ambivalence with regard to some of his sayings. We have already seen how Ibn 'Arabi pointed to limitations in Abu Yazid's comprehension of the divine names, and to certain mystical perceptions that Ibn 'Arabi had surpassed. His ambivalence becomes most pronounced when it comes to the classification of Abu Yazid's sayings as ecstatic utterances (*shathiyyât*). As shown above, Ibn 'Arabi resisted the suggestion that the "no attributes" saying was an ecstatic utterance, arguing instead that the state of "place" required him (*iqtidâhu*) to speak. This comment needs to be placed into the

context of Ibn 'Arabi's attitude toward *shathiyyât*.

In his lexicon of mystical terminology, Ibn 'Arabi briefly defined *shath* as "a verbal expression having a scent of thoughtlessness (*ru'ûna*) and a claim, which issues from an ecstasy (*tawqijud*) of the realizers of truth, the people of the religious law." [49] His unease with this category stems from its association with lack of mental control and from the assertiveness of its claims, even though it may emerge as a result of a legitimate spiritual state. In a fuller account of *shath* in Chapter 195 of *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, Ibn 'Arabi elaborated further, describing it as a legitimate spiritual claim made without any divine command and by way of boasting (*fakhr*). Chittick conveys Ibn 'Arabi's disapproval of *shath* by translating the term as "unruly utterance". [50] Ibn 'Arabi contrasted this irrepressible form of speaking with the self-control of prophets such as Jesus, who only speak by God's command and never boast. Indulging in *shath* is thus a result of heedlessness that never befalls the true knower of God except by accident. Falsely claiming a spiritual state is of course

nothing better than a contemptible lie. Ibn 'Arabi rightly isolates boasting as a characteristic element in *shath*, for its cultural antecedents go back to the boasting contest (*mufâkhara*) of pre-Islamic Arabia.[51] Ibn 'Arabi's distinctiveness lies in his rejecting the boast as an improper assertion of self, while other Sufis view it as a rhetorical form that is an acceptable genre for the expression of ecstasy.

It is curious that in his discussion of *shath*, Ibn 'Arabi does not refer to any particular ecstatic utterances of the Sufis, preferring instead to give examples of the sayings of Jesus from the Qur'an by way of contrast. This is odd because on numerous occasions, Ibn 'Arabi cites famous examples of *shathiyyât* (often without mentioning the names of their authors), in the context of other discussions, sometimes interpreting the same *shath* in radically different ways depending on the context. For instance, he continues his critical attitude toward spiritual arrogance, pointing out that those who say "I am God" or "Glory be to Me" are like Pharaoh; this condition is only possible when one is overcome by a state such as heedlessness, and it is not possible with a prophet or perfect

saint.⁵² Although this remark does not mention Abu Yazid by name, he is clearly intended, although we have no evidence of Abu Yazid using the phrase "I am God" (*anâ allâh*).[53] Elsewhere, in contrast, Ibn 'Arabi cites this very saying favorably, to illustrate the state of "the proximity of supererogatory works" (*qurb al-nawâfil*). He says (in allusion to a *hadîth qudsî*) that the only ones who can say "I am God" are God and the perfect servant whose tongue, hearing, sight, faculties, and organs are God - an example of this is Abu Yazid.[54] In another context, Ibn 'Arabi again refers to Abu Yazid as one who loves God so passionately that he does not see God as different from him, and God loves him to the point of being his hearing, sight, and tongue.[55] Ambiguously, he comments on this state by quoting anonymously the first distich of a famous verse of Hallaj: "I am the one whom I desire, whom I desire is I" (*anâ man ahwâ wa man ahwâ anâ*).[56] As in the case of Abu Yazid, Hallaj was someone whose spiritual status Ibn 'Arabi respected, though he expressed reservations about Hallaj's unrestrained speech.[57] A comprehensive analysis of Ibn 'Arabi's comments on the ecstatic sayings of Abu Yazid and al-

Hallaj would certainly be desirable, but from these few examples it is clear that Ibn 'Arabi sometimes dismisses ecstatic sayings as improper behavior, but that at other times he gives them a positive value in terms of recognized mystical knowledge. In fact, Ibn 'Arabi makes it clear that the words of the saints do not have any independent meaning aside from the spiritual state (*hal*) of the saint, as he understands it. Regarding the interpretation of two sayings on the subject of "gathering" (*jam'*) by an anonymous Sufi and by al-Daqqâq, Ibn 'Arabi remarks,

He may mean this, which is the position that we maintain and that the realities bestow. If we knew who the author of this saying is, we would judge it by his state, as we judged al-Daqqâq through our knowledge of his station and state.

The same words could have another meaning if uttered by someone else in a different state.

To return to the "man without qualities" saying, it appears that Ibn 'Arabi regarded it as distinct from *shath* or ecstatic utterance, on the grounds that the spiritual state required (*iqtidâ*) its

expression by Abu Yazid. In other words, Abu Yazid did not say it of his own volition, as a boast, but he was in effect ordered to do so by God. In this way it remains a valid source of spiritual knowledge rather than the willful result of thoughtlessness or frivolity. Ruzbihan Baqli, on the other hand, classified this saying as *shath* without qualification; in his view that classification, far from discrediting the saying, raised it to a level of lofty spiritual experience. The difference lies in the varying attitudes of the two authors toward ecstatic expressions. Yet there is a rhetorical tone in some of Ibn 'Arabi's sayings about his own experiences that suggests *shath*, especially when he contrasts the experiences of others unfavorably with his own. In terms of his own theory as just discussed, however, Ibn 'Arabi's descriptions of his spiritual attainments do not constitute boasting, because he has not expressed them of his own will. On numerous occasions, Ibn 'Arabi maintains that his books and teachings have been the direct products of the divine will: "I swear by God, I say nothing, I announce no judgment that does not proceed from an inbreathing of the divine spirit in my

heart."^[59] Although technically this escapes from the reproach of boasting, since it is under divine command, it nonetheless has the appearance of a rhetoric of transcendental hyperbole that shares important characteristics with *shath*. When he says that none of his teachings derive from his own will, Ibn 'Arabi is making the boast that he makes no boast.

To continue this line of thinking, one might view, for instance, the claims of later Naqshbandi Sufis such as Ahmad Sirhindi as a continual raising of the stakes *vis-à-vis* earlier Sufis (such as Ibn 'Arabi!) in a sort of spiritual one-upmanship, and it is worth noting that some of Sirhindi's statements were also characterized as ecstatic utterances.^[60] If Ibn 'Arabi's statements are not simply taken at face value as irrefutable guides to his spiritual status, then his critical attitude toward *shath* should be taken with a grain of salt. Ibn 'Arabi's dramatic statements about his own status as the "seal of the saints", for example, place him in a position beyond that of any other saint and only just below the prophets. To regard this as devoid of boasting while rejecting the ecstatic sayings of Abu Yazid or Hallaj

amounts to special privilege. Unless an argument is to be made for extending this special privilege to Ibn 'Arabi, then his interpretations of earlier Sufis should be treated as exactly that. I suggest that analysis of this kind of rhetoric of transcendental hyperbole, as an extension of the boasting factor of *shath*, would be a fruitful way to approach the self-descriptions of a number of later Sufis.

How should we understand the distinctive interpretation that Ibn 'Arabi gives to the sayings of Abu Yazid? On the issue of selection, judgment must be deferred until a comprehensive study can be made of all the references that Ibn 'Arabi makes to his predecessor. In terms of textual transmission and variants we can say more, based on the examples reviewed above. It would be trivial and idiotic to complain that Ibn 'Arabi has forgotten or willfully altered an existing text, just because the versions that he gives sometimes differ from those found in Sahlagi and others. The textual variants have greater significance than that. As Chittick remarks, "In his usual manner, Ibn 'Arabi has in mind the sayings of earlier masters as the background for what he wants to explain, but then he

takes the concept... back to its deepest meaning in the divine realities."^[61] Some of the textual variants described above certainly permit Ibn 'Arabi to expound upon his characteristic teachings on the divine attributes and the relation between God and humanity. It is in this doctrinal level of interpretation that we find the distinctive position of Ibn 'Arabi, in contrast with the positions of other interpreters such as Ruzbihan Baqli. Ibn 'Arabi is also selective in how he categorizes the genre of the sayings of his predecessors. Sayings classified as ecstatic utterances, even though proceeding from a genuine spiritual state, cannot be accepted as sources of doctrine. Sayings that emerge by divine necessity, untainted by the boasting of *shath*, may be treated as authoritative. Ibn 'Arabi does not make clear what criteria he uses to describe a statement as ecstatic boasting rather than authoritative inspiration; he at different times considers the same statement as falling under both categories. If Ibn 'Arabi's treatment of *shath* partakes, however lightly, of the rhetoric of boasting, then his interpretation of the sayings and states of earlier Sufis also subordinates them

to his own immediate doctrinal and experiential concerns.

Beyond the question of doctrinalization, we must also attempt to understand his use of quotations in terms of the function of texts, both written and oral, in Sufism; Ibn 'Arabi is certainly not unique in this respect, but he has worked out his method in marvellously complete detail. If it is true that words, like people, find their meaning in contexts, it is really only through the revoicing of a word, through its quotation from the mouth of another human being, that words receive life — so a quotation approached in this way is not a fixed external text that is "dead from the dead", but is instead inspired (in the words of Abu Yazid) "by the Living who does not die". Abu Yazid's status as an Uwaysi guide, appearing directly like Khidr to inspire later generations of Sufis, may also have contributed to the flexibility with which Ibn 'Arabi invokes him via quotation.^[62]

We should recall that Ibn 'Arabi's model for a text is the Qur'an, a text that is fully personalized, for it is inseparable from the Messenger who brings it. It is also deeply enmeshed in

the being of the perfect saint who actualizes the scripture; as Ibn 'Arabi puts it, "the universal man is the Qur'an".^[63] Ibn 'Arabi himself is a person who is fully textualized; he maintains that "everything about which we speak, both in [my] teaching sessions and in my writings, comes only from the presence of the Qur'an and its treasures."^[64] For him, the Qur'an, *hadith*, and the sayings and visions of the saints who are the inheritors of the prophets are not separate elements to be stitched together by laborious allegoresis. They are rather a seamless whole apprehended in a single intuition. The Qur'an (and by extension the sayings of the saints) is for Ibn 'Arabi no dead letter, but perpetually renewed for every reciter.^[65]

Quotation and interpretation, when viewed in this light, are not merely literary enterprises. The metaphor of giving life recalls another story that Ibn 'Arabi relates about Abu Yazid. It seems that Abu Yazid blew on an ant he had killed, and it revived; Ibn 'Arabi comments that God blew when he blew, and it was like Jesus' miracles as recorded in the Qur'an.^[66] Despite its bizarre appearance, this story

commends itself as a metaphor for quotation. As with the ant killed by Abu Yazid, the words of the saints have undergone some violence in the course of textual transmission, but their death is necessary before they can be inspired and revived. Quotation, textual variation, and classification cannot be separated from interpretation. Ibn 'Arabi explained his teachings by reciting and interpreting the words of Sufi saints, so that he could become the revivifier of the faith.

Notes

[1] An earlier version of this article was originally presented at the conference of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society, "The Revivifier of The Way", Berkeley CA, 15 November 1992.

[2] Although the Cairo edition lists 155 questions (*al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 39-139), Osman Yahia's critical edition lists 157; cf. Michel Chodkiewicz, ed., *Les Illuminations de La Mecque/The Meccan Illuminations* (Paris: Sindbad, 1988), p. 500, n. 178; *id.*, *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d'Ibn 'Arabi*, Bibliothèque des Sciences

Humaines (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), pp. 146 ff.

[3] Claude Addas, *Ibn 'Arabi ou la quête du Soufre Rouge*, Bibliothèque des Sciences Humaines (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), pp. 77-8.

[4] Ibn 'Arabi, *La vie merveilleuse de Dhu-l-Nun l'Égyptien*, trans. Roger Deladriere (Paris: Sindbad, 1988).

[5] Deladriere, *La Vie*, pp. 39-41.

[6] Deladriere, *La Vie*, pp. 42-4. Al-Suyuti's work has a similar complexity, relying on extensive quotations from two works by Ibn Bakuya, from Abu Nu'aym, al-Sulami, and Bayhaqi.

[7] I have explored an instance of this problem of transmission in "The Interpretation of Classical Sufi Texts in India: The *Sham'âil al-atqiyâ'* of Rukn al-Din Kashani", paper presented at the American Academy of Religion conference, San Francisco, November 1992.

[8] For details, see my "Ruzbihan Baqli on Love as 'Essential Desire'", in *God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty: Essays in Honor of Annemarie Schimmel*, ed.

J.-C. Bürgel and Alma Giese (forthcoming).

[9] William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 387, n. 8 (hereafter cited as *SPK*).

[10] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 34.11 (this category includes other figures such as Hamdun al-Qassar and Abu Sa'id al-Kharraz)

[11] *Ibid.*, II 40.16-17 (citing also Sahl al-Tustari); this occurs in response to the first of al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi's 157 questions directed to "the seal of the saints", in the first *wasl* of chapter 73 of *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*.

[12] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 316.27; trans. *SPK*, p. 40.

[13] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 657.34; trans. *SPK*, p. 392, n. 34.

[14] *Ibid.*, I 261.11; cf. trans, in *SPK*, p. 392, n. 34.

[15] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 318.30-2 (citing also Sahl al-Tustari, Ibn al-

'Arif, and Abu Madyan); trans. *SPK*, p. 149.

[16] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 6.15, 30-1. For commentary on these terms, see Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau*, p. 120.

[17] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* I 99.9-11.

[18] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* I 251.33, 252.10-15; cf. Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau*, p. 141.

[19] Chodkiewicz, *Le Sceau*, p. 179, n. 3; Addas, *Ibn 'Arabi*, p. 87, n.l; p. 89, citing *Mawâqî' al-nujûm*, p. 140; pp. 128-9, citing *Muhâdarât al-abrâr*.

[20] Abu Nasr 'Abdallah B. 'Ali al-Sarraj al-Tusi, *The Kitâb al-Lumâ' fî't-Tasawwuf*, ed. Reynold Alleyne Nicholson, "E. J. W. Gibb Memorial" Series, vol. XXII (London, 1914; reprint edn, London: Luzac, 1963), pp. 380-95.

[21] On Sahlagi (Arabicized as al-Sahlaki or al-Sahlaji), see Georges Vajda, "Une breve typologie du soufisme: K. Rûh al-Rûh, opuscule inédit de Muhammad b. 'Ali al-Sahlaki al-Bistami", *Arabica* 29 (1982), pp. 307-14.

[22] Ruzbihan Baqli, *Sharh-i shathiyyât*, ed. Henry Corbin, Bibliotheque Iranienne, 12 (Tehran: Departement d'iranologie de l'Institut Franco-iranien, 1966), pp. 78-147, commenting on thirty-one sayings; Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr Ibrahim Farid al-Din 'Attar Nishaburi, *Kitâb-i tadhkirat al-awliyyâ'*, ed. R. A. Nicholson (5th edn, Tehran: Intisharat-i Markaz, n.d.), I, pp. 129-66.

[23] 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Shatahât al-Sûfiyya*, Part One, *Abû Yazid al-Bistâmî*, Darasat Islamiyya 9 (Cairo: Maktaba al-Nahda al-Misriyya, 1949); Abdelwahab Meddeb, trans., *Les Dits de Bistami: Shatahât*, L'espace intérieur 38 (Paris: Fayard, 1989). Meddeb cites the Arabic text according to a reprint of Badawi's edition, published in Kuwait in 1978; this was not available to me.

[24] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, I 280.25; *SPK*, p. 249.

[25] Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 77; trans. Meddeb, p. 58, no. 71.

[26] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, III 136.8, trans. *SPK*, p. 323.

[27] Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 76 (trans. Meddeb, p. 57, no. 68).

[28] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* I 210.7, III 212.34, trans, in *SPK*, p. 37.

[29] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 212.34-213.10.

[30] Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 23, no. 24 (citing *Hilya* X, 41), trans. Meddeb, p. 182, no. 453 (in n. 133, Meddeb mistakenly assumes that the source for this saying is Sarraj).

[31] Badawi, *Shatahat*, p. 119 (trans. Meddeb, p. 129, no. 302, in a truncated form that preserves only Abu Yazid's response).

[32] For these terms, see my "The Stages of Love in Early Persian Sufism, from Rabi'a to Ruzbihan," in *The Legacy of Mediaeval Persian Sufism*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi, 1993).

[33] See Shibli in my *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), p. 38.

[34] Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 110 (omitted by Meddeb, this follows the saying he numbers 253).

[35] *SPK*, p. 65, with note 9, giving a plural form "attributes".

[36] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* IV 319.32-3.

[37] *Innamâ al-sabâh wa al-masâ' li-man taqayyada bil-sifa, wa lâ sifata lî*.

[38] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 133.21-3.

[39] Other references to the "man without attributes" include *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 646.29 (trans. *SPK*, p. 376); II 187.11; III 106.16 (see *SPK*, p. 391, n. 9). The similar expression "no station" (Qur. 33:13) designates the rank of Abu Yazid and other "Muhammadans" who are heirs of the prophet (*al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* I 223.2, trans. *SPK*, p. 377); place (*makân*) is a transcendent location for Idris (Qur. 19:57) and other perfect ones who have, like Abu Yazid, passed beyond states and stations; cf. II 386.19 (*SPK*, p. 379). Other citations occur in *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 177, 216, 500; IV 28. Chodkiewicz, *Le*

Sceau, pp. 52-4, links the "no attributes" saying with Abu Yazid's definitions of sainthood as reported by Sulami and Qushayri.

[40] Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 70, repeated on p. 111. Meddeb (p. 70, no. 47) translates, "Le matin et le soir sont pour celui sur qui l'attribut a prise; et moi, je l'échappe a tout attribut."

[41] For the use of the term *taqyîd* and related terms, see *SPK*, index, s.v. "*qayd*". The term *ta'khudhuhu* recalls the Throne Verse (2:256), "Slumber does not hold him (*la ta'khudhuhu*), neither does he sleep." Curiously, Ruzbihan's Persian translation does not preserve the nuance, translating the saying as "Morning and evening belong to that person who has no attribute..." (*bâmdâd u shabângâh ân kas-râ bâshad kih û-râ sifâtî bâshad*); cf. *Shark*, no. 77, p. 137.

[42] Ruzbihan, *Mantiq al-asrâr*, MS Louis Massignon collection, Paris, fol. 83a/3 (*innamâ al-sabâh wa al-masâ' li-man ya'khudhuhu* [sic] *al-sifa, wa lâ sifata lî*).

[43] Ruzbihan Baqli, *Sharh*, no. 77, p. 137.

[44] 'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani, *Tamhîdât*, ed. 'Afif 'Usayran, Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 695 (Tehran: Chapkhana-i Danishgah, 1341/1962), p. 213.

[45] E.g., Badawi, *Shatahât*, pp. 78 (Meddeb, p. 60, no. 79), 79 (Meddeb, p. 62, no. 88), 82 (Meddeb, p. 67, no. 110), 111 (Meddeb, p. 116, no. 260). Similarly, one might contrast Ibn 'Arabi's use of the "no attributes" saying to define *makân* with Abu Yazid's long description of *makân*, in Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 75 (trans. Meddeb, p. 54, no. 63).

[46] *Fusûs al-Hikam* Ch. VI; Ibn al-'Arabi, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R. W. J. Austin, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 101-2. Cf. also Ch. XII, trans. Austin, p. 148, for another brief citation of this saying.

[47] 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Qashani, *Sharh 'alâ fusûs al-Hikam* (2nd edn, Egypt: Mustafa Babi Halabi wa Awladuh, 1386/1966), p. 109.

[48] Another example is Ibn 'Arabi's entry into the state of proximity or *qurba*, recalling the solitude that Abu Yazid experienced on entering this state, but then reflecting that this state is his homeland and thus is no cause for loneliness. Cf. *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*, II 261.2-4, trans. Denis Gril, in *Illuminations*, p. 340.

[49] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 133.23-4.

[50] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 387.8-388.26, trans. Chittick, *Illuminations*, pp. 265-74.

[51] Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy*, pp. 36-40.

[52] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* I 276.2, trans. SPK, p. 320.

[53] Abu Yazid regards *allah* as the only divine name that cannot be applied to a creature; Badawi, *Shatahât*, p. 82 (trans. Meddeb, p. 67, no. 110). Abu Yazid did actually use the claim of Pharaoh as reported in the Qur'an, "I am your highest lord" (*Words of Ecstasy*, p. 51), but this may be another case in which Ibn 'Arabi treats the quotation in a flexible fashion.

[54] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* IV 11.16, in SPK, p. 410, n. 12. For the *hadîth al-nawâfil*, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), pp. 43, 133, 144, 277.

[55] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 361.9-11; cf. the translation of Maurice Gloton, *Traité de l'amour*, Spiritualités vivantes, 60 (Paris: Albin Michel, 1986), pp. 257-8.

[56] Louis Massignon, ed., *Le Dîwân d'al-Hallaj* (new edn, Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1955), no. 57, p. 93.

[57] On Ibn 'Arabi's ambivalent attitude toward Hallaj, see Louis Massignon, *La Passion de Husayn Ibn Mansûr Hallâj* (new edn, Paris: Gallimard, 1975), II, pp. 414-19.

[58] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 517.15, trans. Chittick, *Illuminations*, p. 284.

[59] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 101.6-7; trans. Chodkiewicz, *Illuminations*, p. 24. Cf. *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* II 456, trans. Chodkiewicz, *ibid.*: "I have not written a single letter of this book

except under the effect of a divine dictation, of a lordly projection, of a spiritual inbreathing at the heart of my being." The introduction to *Fusûs al-Hikam* describes the Prophet Muhammad handing the book to Ibn 'Arabi and ordering him to disseminate its teachings, and commentators sometimes fall back on that to defend controversial positions.

[60] Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), pp. 94-6. Sirhindi explicitly claimed a spiritual status that exceeded both Abu Yazid and Ibn 'Arabi, observing that their claims were based on improperly interpreted experiences that his own teachings clarified; his critics in turn charged him with arrogance. See Ghulam 'Ali Azad Bilgrami, *Subhat al-marjân fî âthâr Hindûstân*, ed. Muhammad Fadl al-Rahman al-Nadwi al-Siwani (Aligarh: Jami'at Aligarh al-Islamiyya, 1972), I, pp. 131-7, and Friedmann, pp. 28, 60, 62-8, 88.

[61] Chittick, in *Illuminations*, p. 256.

[62] I owe this insight to John Mercer.

[63] Ibn 'Arabi, *Kitâb al-isfâr* (Hyderabad, 1948), p. 17, trans. Chodkiewicz, *Illuminations*, pp. 42-3. From another point of view, the universe as a whole is a great Qur'an; *ibid.*, pp. 38, 428.

[64] *Al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 334.30, trans. J. W. Morris, *Illuminations*, p. 135; cf. p. 521, n. 64.

[65] Cf. *al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya* III 93, trans. Chodkiewicz, *Illuminations*, pp. 56-7.

[66] *Fusûs al-Hikam* Ch. XV (trans. Austin, p. 179).